

Written Testimony of Ugonma Chike-Kalu, Student Member, Baltimore County Board of Education on Senate Bill 656 – Baltimore County Board of Education Redistricting

Chairman Feldman, Vice Chair Kagan, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 656. My name is Ugonma Chike-Kalu, and while I serve as the Student Member of the Baltimore County Board of Education, I am testifying today in my individual capacity. *My remarks do not reflect the views of the Board as a whole but rather my perspective as a student leader and advocate for equitable representation in education governance.*

Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) is the third-largest school system in Maryland, serving over 111,000 students with diverse needs, backgrounds, and aspirations. Our school board must reflect that diversity—not only in demographics but in thought, lived experiences, and advocacy. The proposed changes in SB 656 offer a more inclusive framework for representation, balancing localized district interests with countywide accountability.

Currently, Baltimore County elects its school board members by councilmanic districts, meaning residents only vote for the candidate representing their area. While this system ensures localized representation, it also limits voter engagement with the broader leadership of the board. SB 656 introduces a hybrid model—one that maintains district-based representation while also allowing the entire county to vote on all board seats, similar to Montgomery County. This shift is critical for four reasons:

1. ***Expanding Voter Input for Stronger Accountability:*** A school board's decisions affect every student and educator in BCPS, yet voters are restricted to choosing only one representative. By allowing countywide voting for all board seats while maintaining district-based candidacy requirements, we ensure that board members are accountable not just to a portion of the county, but to all who are impacted by their decisions.
2. ***Ensuring Equitable Representation and Redistricting:*** Baltimore County's population is growing and shifting, and our school board's district boundaries must evolve accordingly. The bill mandates redistricting after each decennial census to reflect changes in student populations and community needs. This provision prevents disparities in representation,

ensuring that no district is disproportionately under- or overrepresented due to outdated boundaries.

3. ***Aligning School Governance with Best Practices:*** Montgomery County has long operated under a system where all voters have a say in electing board members while ensuring geographic diversity through district-based candidacy. This approach strengthens public trust in education governance and encourages more robust, issue-based campaigns rather than hyperlocal political battles. Given the complexities of leading a district as large as BCPS, a board structure that balances district and countywide accountability is essential.
4. ***Representation Must Reflect Our Realities:*** As a student representative, I witness firsthand how board decisions impact classrooms, mental health resources, curriculum choices, and school safety policies. Effective board governance requires leaders who not only advocate for their district's needs but also collaborate to address systemic issues affecting the entire county. Moreover, SB 656 does not change the student member's role, but it reinforces a broader principle: students deserve a school board that is truly representative, engaged, and responsive to their needs. When board members are elected with input from all county residents, they are more accountable for decisions that shape the future of every student, not just those in their immediate district.

SB 656 is not about restructuring for the sake of change—it is about strengthening our school board's ability to serve students, parents, and educators equitably. A hybrid election model, combined with regular redistricting, ensures that BCPS leadership is responsive, representative, and accountable. I urge the committee to support this bill and move it forward for the benefit of all Baltimore County students.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ugonma Chike-Kalu

Student Member, Baltimore County Board of Education (Testifying as an Individual)